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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ANKARA 003899

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SUBJECT: TURKEY: WORRISOME TRENDS IN KURDISH POLITICS

REF: ANKARA 3638

Classified by Pol Officer Philip Kaplan; reason 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: Despite some small steps forward, cynicism and suspicion dominate the mood among Turkey,s Southeast Kurds. The Democractic Society Party (DTP), which has pushed to allow the PKK to be a legitimate interlocutor with Ankara, remains the leading political party in the region, and alternatives to the DTP are even less constructive. In particular, the reemergence of the radical Islamic Turkish Hizbullah bears close watching. End summary.

¶2. (C) During a June 20-23 trip to Mardin, Sirnak, and Diyarbakir provinces, Adana Consulate PO and poloff held a series of meetings with local officials to discuss regional economic and political developments. This cable addresses trends in Kurdish politics. Septel will address economic developments in the region and the ongoing construction project at Habur gate.

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Pessimism Reins in Southeast  
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¶3. (C) Contacts among Diyarbakir,s NGO community and the Cizre branch of the DTP described the mood in the Southeast as pessimistic, despite some recent small steps forward. Long-time Consulate contact and head of the Diyarbakir Bar Association Sezgin Tanrikulu asserted to us that the recent conference in Diyarbakir on the Kurdish issue represented the first time Kurds of all political stripes had come together under one roof to share views constructively. Officials at the Cizre DTP branch told us that the Semdinli verdict (reftel) stands as a positive move by the State and expressed hope that the convictions and sentences would stick.

¶4. (C) These encouraging events are tempered, however, by doubt and cynicism that permeated all of the discussions with our Kurdish interlocutors. In particular, Tanrikulu noted that he was pleased with the outcome of this stage of the Semdinli trial but is convinced the judiciary will ultimately acquit the jandarma NCOs. Tanrikulu, who attended the Semdinli trial in Van province and has been an outspoken critic of the security apparatus, added that he had recently received several threatening phone calls from what he speculates were jandarma intelligence (formerly JITEM, now called JIT, according to our contacts) officers. He echoed

comments we heard earlier from the Cizre DTP officials, claiming that the arrest of bookstore owner Seferi Yilmaz was a deliberate provocation designed to send a message to Kurds not to cross swords with the State.

15. (C) Some of our contacts were also deeply suspicious about the conduct of military operations against the PKK. The Cizre DTP officials claimed that the security forces had deliberately set the Cudi mountains on fire in Sirnak, destroying thousands of acres of land and livestock. (Note: local press claims Turkish soldiers are not allowing civilians access to extinguish the fires. End note.) Bishop Samuel Aktas at the Mor Gabriel Syriac Orthodox monastery in Mardin told us the local Syriac villagers who returned from Europe in 2005 may have to forfeit some of their Sari village land because of the slow return of Kurdish village guards to the area seeking to reclaim their property. As a result, Aktas asserted, the village guards set a nearby forest on fire (consulate officers later saw an enormous stretch of burned forest near the monastery) in order to give the impression to local jandarma that the PKK is active in the area and that the village guards need to stay.

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Youths to the PKK  
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16. (C) Our contacts did not believe that the Southeast is returning to the levels of violence and tension the region saw in the 1990s, but most noted that the current tension will not go away soon and expect that PKK-related violence will continue. One potential reason for a steady drumbeat of clashes may be due to the flow of disenchanting Kurdish youths

ANKARA 00003899 002 OF 003

to the ranks of the PKK. Southeastern Industrialists and Businessmens Association (GUNSIAD) President Shahismail Bedirhanoglu, a long-time contact and a recent International Visitors Program participant, claimed that although tension had lessened since the March riots in Diyarbakir, Kurdish youths still cannot find work, and many are leaving the cities to join the PKK. Diyarbakir Human Rights Association (HRA) chairman Selahattin Demirtas told us that the number of young people joining the PKK has increased notably over the last year. One way HRA can monitor this trend, Demirtas claimed, is by the number of families contacting HRA to let them know their children have gone missing. Many of the families later tell HRA that the children have left their homes to fight for the PKK. Demirtas claimed that somewhere around 1,000 youths had joined the PKK since the beginning of 2005, many from Diyarbakir and other southeastern cities and villages, but also from Mersin.

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DTP not the only game in town, but that,s not a good thing  
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17. (C) According to our contacts, the DTP remains the main political force in the region. The gains the Justice and Development Party (AKP) made locally in the run-up to the 2004 local elections appear to be softening as tension and violence have increased. (Comment: Diyarbakir AK officials claim just the opposite and bank on a previously untapped Islamic female vote to buoy their future numbers. Even if these predictions hold true, much urban Kurdish support and most village support squarely is in DTP,s corner. End Comment.) Close Embassy contact and former MP Hasim Hasimi, who himself has a wide range of contacts both among Kurds on the left and among more conservative, pious circles, told us that although the DTP was primarily run by leftist intellectuals who have little contact with man-on-the-street Kurds, the party is still the only legitimate political force in the region for now. Hasimi argued that DTP,s enduring popularity is tied directly to its relationship to the PKK. As clashes with the PKK have increased, support for the DTP has also gone up. Yet, Hasimi asserted, there is a

significant portion of Kurds in the Southeast (he couldn't say what percentage) who are disenchanted with DTP politics--particularly more religious Kurds, who see the DTP as Marxist-Leninist and therefore atheist, but also among moderate Kurds who want to distance themselves from PKK violence. Tanrikulu told us that there is a perception among many Kurds that neither the DTP nor the AKP has been able to address their concerns and they want an alternative.

18. (C) The problem, according to Hasimi, is that the alternatives are no more practical or constructive than the DTP. Abdulmelik Firat,s Hak-Par group and other voices like long-time Kurdish political activist Serafettin Elci are trying to distance themselves from the PKK and become a legitimate Kurdish interlocutor with the Ankara political establishment. In a meeting with us, a founding member of Hak-Par, who has pending cases against him for using Kurdish openly at political rallies, condemned the PKK,s use of violence but also claimed the only solution to the Kurdish issue was a federal state. Hasimi later asserted to us that no one in Ankara would accept this. &Even the PKK has given up on a federal Turkey,8 Hasimi observed.

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Turkish Hizbullah Resurgent?  
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19. (C) Turkish Hizbullah may be benefiting from the uncertainty among Kurds, particularly religious Kurds. Our contacts were universal in claiming that support for radical Islam\*Turkish Hizbullah, in particular\*is on the rise again in the Southeast. Hasimi attributed Hizbullah,s reemergence to dissatisfaction with the DTP and ongoing tension in the region. Our contacts claimed that this version of Hizbullah is different from that which terrorized Kurdish businessmen associated with the PKK in the 1990s. Bishop Aktas said that the spread of radical Islam from the Middle East has fueled the group,s rebirth, adding that unlike in the 1990s, Hizbullah does not now need State support to survive. (Note: Many Turks believe that Hizbullah received arms and money from the State in the 1990s to fight a proxy war against PKK

ANKARA 00003899 003 OF 003

supporters in the Southeast. Dozens of unexplained murders were attributed to the group until it was wrapped up by Turkish authorities in early 2000\*scant months after PKK leader Ocalan was captured. End note.)

110. (C) Both Hasimi and Tanrikulu said that several foundations have sprung up in Diyarbakir and elsewhere in the Southeast with direct ties to Hizbullah. They singled out one called &Mustazaflar8 that has branches in (at a minimum) Sirnak and Diyarbakir provinces. Tanrikulu conceded that the group is not yet strong enough to become a major force in local politics but remains a potential threat. Tanrikulu claimed that the security forces are aware of Hizbullah,s revival but are thus far only keeping a close eye on them. Reflecting the deep cynicism that pervades here, Tanrikulu speculated that the security forces may leave them alone hoping that the group begins attacking PKK supporters once again.

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Barzani,s Regional Influence Growing  
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111. (C) Another potential wildcard in Kurdish politics is the popularity of Mesud Barzani, whose KRG-based media outlets pepper the Southeast airwaves with stories of increasing Kurdish autonomy in northern Iraq. Kurdish politicians in Turkey, including Elci and former MP and darling of the EU Leyla Zana, have recently paid homage to Barzani, perhaps in part as a reflection of his emerging influence over Kurds in Turkey. Hasimi told us that the Barzani clan has long had a place in the hearts of Kurds thanks to the efforts of Barzani,s father\*both a Kurdish

nationalist and a leading Naksibendi (religious brotherhood, popular among Kurds in particular, that counts PM Erdogan as one of its members). From the late-1970s through the 1990s, the PKK eclipsed the Barzanis, popularity among Kurds in Turkey, according to Hasimi. Increasing autonomy for Kurds in northern Iraq, however, has led to a revival of Barzani,s popularity. Hasimi claims that Kurds of all stripes can like him\*unlike the PKK. Leftist Kurds like him because he is a strong Kurdish nationalist who has stood up to the Turks in the past (Note: Barzani also cooperated with the Turkish military against fellow Kurds in the 1990s.. End note). Religious Kurds can like him because of his Naksibendi connections. Tribal leaders in the Southeast\*most of whom tend to be successful businessmen\*have reached out to him aswell, according to Hasimi. Hasimi noted, however, that for now anyway Barzani,s pull is limited because the PKK still holds the hearts of most Kurds, and tribal rivalries will eventually get in the way of deep cooperation.

¶12. (C) Comment: Part of the enduring problem in Kurdish politics is trying to pin down what Kurds really want. A separate state? A federal Turkey? More cultural rights? Economic opportunities? We find competing and overlapping trends, reflecting inability to come to a consensus. The emotional nature of the issue suggests it will not be easily solved through a series of policy changes. Kurds in the southeast have a deep sense of alienation\*alienation that begins as soon as they enter the Turkish school system. Demirtas told us that when young Kurds go to school for the first time, they typically know little Turkish and have had virtually no exposure to the state,s limited welfare arms. They immediately feel like they do not belong, and teachers do nothing to help them out. From that moment on, they know they are outsiders.

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